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"WHAT HAS THE BIRTH OF JESUS DONE FOR THE WORLD?"

BY

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Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

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BOSTON
GEO. H. ELLIS CO., 272 CONGRESS STREET
1909

This was Dr. Clarke's last Christmas sermon.

It was preached December 25, 1887.

"WHAT HAS THE BIRTH OF JESUS DONE FOR THE WORLD?"

"And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb."—BOOK OF REVELATION xxii. 1.

What has the birth of Jesus done for mankind?

In answering this question, we must first admit that, thus far, the life of Jesus has not realized outwardly what the prophets foretold. It has not yet abolished war; it has not put an end to crime; it has not converted the world to the worship of one God. It has been an influence, a spur to progress, a great hope, a divine expectation rather than an accomplishment.

Instead of the sword being beaten into a ploughshare and the spear into a pruning-hook, the instruments of human destruction have been multiplied and magnified a thousand-fold. The machines for destroying armies, forts, and ships, have reached such gigantic proportions that resistance to such agencies may at last become impossible, and so war may destroy itself. But behind international war are other conflicts yet more subtle. The Christian Church is divided into sects and parties, each contending for its own creed or ritual, each standing apart from the rest; and the Christian Church is thus disorganized, and unable to unite its force against evil and sin. As long as this is the case, the world will not be converted to Christ. For he prayed that his disciples might be one, that the world might believe that

God had sent him. According to this prayer of Jesus the time foretold by the prophets, when the world should be "full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea," will not arrive till the Church of Christ is one,—one in spirit, one in common sympathy, one in united action.

Again, even in Christian countries, where are the Christians? Christianity certainly means mutual sympathy, good-will, and co-operation in social life. Is *that* the spirit of Christian countries? Is it not rather a disorderly competition,—each man for himself, a struggle for wealth, position, influence, in which those who fall are likely to be trampled on by the strong and successful?

Christ came to fulfil law in love. In Christian lands that other prophetic saying should be realized,—"I will write my law in their hearts." Men were to do right, not from force or fear or from the hope of reward, but from the love of right-doing. But to-day some of the leaders of the Church in the United States tell us that it would cut the nerves of missionary effort to admit that the heathen, who have never heard of Christ, may have a chance hereafter of escaping eternal punishment.

So we might go on, pointing out the great defects of our Christian civilization. Nevertheless, any serious study of history will show that the world, in Christian lands, *is* making real progress, and that there is no past century which can be compared with this in the diffusion of knowledge, good morals, and a rational religion. Read Thackeray's account of England under the four Georges. Read Taine's account of the state of France before the Revolution,—the misery of the people, the luxury of the aristocracy. Read Madame Rémusat's account of the court of Napoleon, of

his coarse outbursts and small vanities. All of these evils are outgrown, and have become impossible. Manners and morals have become more pure. Philanthropic efforts for the relief of human misery have become systematic and permanent. The Christian Church is more rational and free than ever before, and is fast learning to think more of the kernel than of the husk, of the spirit than of the letter, and to have faith in God, in man, and in the power of truth. Let me give one illustration of this. Only two or three years ago the government of Harvard College believed that, if college prayers were not compulsory, scarcely any students would attend. A year ago they tried the experiment of letting the students come to morning prayer or not, as they pleased. Not only do a large number attend, but the worship, instead of being a form, has become a reality, in which the students are sincerely interested. How often have we heard it said that there is "no religion at Harvard"! What do we see this winter? Harvard students organizing and carrying on missionary meetings in Boston, and the services at these meetings conducted by ministers of different denominations,—Episcopal, Orthodox, and Unitarian working cordially together. This hints at progress.

What has the birth of Jesus done for mankind? It has brought God near to man. Not by argument, not by demonstration to the logical intellect, but by a great spiritual influence, Jesus has made the presence of God a reality to the human heart. Those who were afar off are nigh. In all Christian lands there is the sense of a divine presence such as did not exist before Christ's coming. He has put the spirit into our hearts by which we say, "Abba! Father!" Jesus has made it a joy to look up, to adore, to worship,

to love. This sense of a divine presence has brought peace to troubled consciences, to saddened hearts, to those on whom life lays heavy burdens, to the lonely and the bereaved.

There are those who tell us that there is not as much religion now as formerly. They point to the Middle Ages as the ages of faith. What splendid cathedrals were built in the thirteenth century! What magnificent abbeys and convents were thickly scattered over the face of Europe! How many thousands of monks and nuns lived only for religion! How the majority of men in Christian lands fasted, confessed, attended public worship, and accepted the Christian faith without a doubt. But now how impossible to erect such noble ecclesiastical monuments; now what multitudes have nothing to do with churches; how many call themselves agnostics, believing in nothing spiritual; how many more, wholly indifferent, do not take the trouble even to ask whether they believe anything or not!

We must admit there was formerly a great deal more of the external part of religion; but was there more of its essence? Men feared God more: did they love him better? Does love always show itself in outward ceremonies and forms? Does it not more often appear in perfect confidence, in entire trust? We do not now go so much to church to find God, but perhaps we feel his presence more in nature, life, science, literature, art. He is now "Immanuel, God with us." The whole world is now his temple. The stars and flowers sing his praise with voiceless lips,—

> "Each cup a pulpit, and each bell a book."

The spirit of hope, which pervades all Christian lands, is an evidence of this sense of the presence of God. For there

is no truer saying than that of Scripture,—"Without God in the world, and so without hope." Those who are without God are also without hope. Hope is the sense of the Infinite in all finite things, of the perfect amid all imperfection, of a wise providence guiding all events amid apparent accident, of a divine love superior to all sorrow and pain, and of a heavenly immortality conquering decay and death.

The first blessing, then, that Jesus has brought to mankind is the spirit of faith in an ever-present Goodness. Wherever Christianity has gone, it has made possible this communion of trust and love between the human child and the infinite Father. No doubt there have been in all lands and times saintly and prophetic souls who struggled up to an ecstatic intercourse with the divine spirit within them. Even Seneca said, "A sacred spirit is within us." But these have been mostly exceptional and occasional cases. This communion has not been for all mankind, but for a few select souls,—seers, saints, prophets. Nor with them has it been a common daily experience, but an occasional rapture. And more than this, instead of becoming a part of life, it has taken them out of life into the seclusion of monasteries or the lonely cell of the hermit. But the Christian influence is for all, for the humblest and lowliest and most ignorant of God's children,—for the slave on the plantation, the prisoner in his cell, the mourner whose friends have gone away and left him alone, and yet he is not alone, for the Father is with him.

This is the greatest blessing which has come to mankind from the birth of Jesus,—the gift of faith in a divine love to every human child.

But let us notice that this is not a doctrine only, nor a

belief, which Jesus has taught, but an influence proceeding from his life. It is described in our text as "a pure river of the water of life, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." Thought and belief are propagated by teaching, knowledge and faith are communicated by spiritual influence. The man who really sees and knows everything by mental insight creates faith in others. This is the way in which Jesus came "to bear witness to the truth." It is the business of a witness to tell what he knows, not what he thinks, not what he has heard from others, but what he has seen himself. He is not to argue. That is the business of the advocate. He is not to repeat any hearsay statements. He is to speak what he knows and testify what he has seen. This was the work of Jesus, who said, "For this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth." Jesus seldom argues: he simply states the divine law as he sees it. And all truly inspired souls do the same. This is living truth, the living bread which comes down from heaven,—not dead knowledge in the memory, but life-giving insight. "I have come," said Jesus, "that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

Besides this faith in God, another great gift of Jesus to mankind has been the constant hope of a better future,—hope of a day to come when mankind shall be free from ignorance, slavery, crime, and sin; hope for the triumph of truth over error, right over wrong, good over evil; hope for all mankind, when the extremes of poverty and wealth shall cease, when there shall be co-operation instead of competition, brotherhood instead of strife. This hope was born with Jesus. It did not exist before, except in the pro-

phetic vision of the Jewish seers or in some few select souls. But it passed from the soul of Jesus into the life of his disciples. It is not founded on logic, but on something more deep,—a new life in the soul. It is not an argument for hope, but it is an inspiration of hope. The apostle Peter says, "We are new-born into a living hope." This hope for mankind, coming in this way, is, like faith, a possession for all. It is an influence reaching far and wide, a leaven pervading the whole of society. This hope is in the atmosphere in all Christian lands. It does not depend on any argument, but on a living conviction below all argument. In all Christian lands there is a constant looking forward, a perpetual expectation of better days.

Why do science, literature, art, flourish in Europe and America, and not in Asia, Africa, or China? Because of this spirit of hope, this universal belief in something newer, better, which fills the air. Other nations sleep, reposing on the past, not looking for anything different. Christian nations are always in a fever of expectation, expecting new discoveries in science and improvement in all arts. This is the prevailing spirit of Christendom, and this is the secret of its progress.

For, without hope, no progress is possible. He who expects much receives much. "Seek, and ye shall find," is the key which opens all doors. Hope bears the golden key to the gates of the future. Doubt, unbelief, scepticism, never create anything. If a man says, "Oh, it is no use, nothing can come of it, there is no use in trying: let us take things as they are, we cannot make them any better," it is certain at least that he is not the man to make them better. But, if you find a man with unfaltering antici-

pation of better things and better days, whom discouragements do not cast down nor disappointments check, who may fail again and again, but never loses hope of ultimate success, he is the man to open the way to something higher and better.

The first blessing which the birth of Jesus has given to the world is faith in an ever-present divine love. The second blessing is the spirit of hope and progress. The third which I shall mention is the sense of immortal life.

Here, as before, the sense of immortality has come to the world from Jesus, not as teaching or argument, but as influence and inspiration. The fulness of life in Jesus inspired a sense of life in the souls of his followers, which has been transmitted, generation after generation, to our own time. "He who liveth and believeth in me cannot die." Life abolishes death: the life of God and hope in the soul raise us above the fear of death. Death ceases to be anything. It is only a single step in the great march onward and upward.

We are God's children: he is our Father; and he is not the God of the dead, but of the living. When our moral life is depressed, in hours of despondency and gloom, death may seem something real. But, when we walk in the sunshine of divine love and divine hope, it disappears altogether from our thought. We do not know much about the future life, and it is best that we should not. But we do know that there, as here, God will be our Father and friend. There, as here, he will be the great Order and the Divine Beauty of the universe. There, as here, there will be homes and love and knowledge, and the satisfaction of work. There, as here, must be the opportunity of progress,

of perpetual ascent, of ever-new attainments and ever-growing faculties and powers.

This is the work which the coming of Jesus has done. It is so broad, so inclusive, so patient of apparent contradiction, so hospitable to variety of tendency, that it necessarily takes a long time to reach a complete harmony. Christianity moves slowly, but continues to advance. It is able to purify itself from the abuses which rise in its bosom, to assimilate to itself the tendencies and convictions of different races, to generate reforms in its own community, and to throw off corruption of theology or morals which grow up in its own churches. It can always go back to the life and teachings of its founder for new inspiration, guidance, reproof, and instruction in righteousness. Therefore, Christ remains the Hope of the World. Therefore, every knee will bow to him because of his divine humanity, the adaptation of his truth to all the wants of man, his sympathy with every human tendency; and in him "the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, maketh increase of the body, to the building of itself up in love."

Thus we have "Christ in us, the hope of glory," and we are made partakers of him "if we hold fast the confidence, and the rejoicing of hope, firm unto the end."

The thinkers who leave Christ are not the advanced thinkers, but the retrograde thinkers. They are turning away from the only Ideal which is leading the world forward.

Wherever Christmas dawns, it dawns with hope. The Child whose birth is now commemorated with joy and gifts in happy homes all over the world has brought, and is ever bringing, new and fair expectations to mankind. He is

more and more bringing us to see God as our Father and man as our brother. He fills the soul evermore with new life. That is why the world keeps Christmas, and rejoices during all the centuries because of the birth of a child in a hamlet of Palestine.